

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

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Lost in my library

by Chuck Kleinhans

Reviews of

- Jon Lewis, *Hard-Boiled Hollywood: Crime and Punishment in Postwar Los Angeles*. Berkeley: U of California Press, 2017.
- Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, eds. *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 2015)
- Zeinabu Irene Davis, *Spirits of Rebellion*, DVD, 101 min., Wimmen with a Mission Productions.
- James Naremore, *Charles Burnett: A Cinema of Symbolic Knowledge* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 2017)
- Charles Burnett, *Killer of Sheep* (DVD), Milestone Film and Video.

I'm a lover of books, or maybe better, someone who has a lot of books. I'm not like a collector who treasures books (though I do treasure some art books), but I've always had a close relation to books. Before I could read, I memorized some little kid's book—I think it was about a bear—and told the story, word for word, while turning the pages at the right place. This convinced my paternal grandmother I was a budding genius who absorbed reading without any instruction. I remember my mom trying to explain it wasn't so, but I think grandma liked the fantasy and wouldn't give it up.

Spending most of my adult life as an intellectual, an academic and an editor, I've always done a lot of reading and handled a lot of books (and articles, periodicals, etc.). What I'd like to do hear is talk about them in a more informal way than a genuine full-bore review. A good review is a challenging task. And it should be pretty objective and fair. But I've often found.

Usually I do not write about books written by friends and colleagues, as distinct from professional acquaintances. Book and media reviewing protocols prohibit crossing the personal/professional boundary because close personal ties likely would influence how the reviewer evaluated the work's quality or importance. (At least this is the standard in science, social science and humanities. The art world routinely disregards this boundary.) I've followed this idea as a writer and editor, but often I'm aware that in limiting myself, I kept readers from knowing about important and lesser known projects. So here, under the banner of full disclosure, I've decided to publish some things about works by friends and colleagues that I think are politically important today.

The press of noir

Jon Lewis, *Hard-Boiled Hollywood: Crime and Punishment in Postwar Los Angeles*. Berkeley: U of California Press, 2017.

In the United States, theatrical film attendance hit an historic high during the World War II years, but Hollywood experienced a precipitous decline in the postwar era. Jon Lewis investigates the aftermath while bracketing the situation with two notorious deaths: the “Black Dahlia” murder in January 1947 and the death of Marilyn Monroe in August 1962. Lewis achieves a very sophisticated and complex level of analysis by picking up and reweaving some familiar strands:

- the decline of the studio system,
- Los Angeles city corruption (especially in the police force),
- the expansion of the greater Los Angeles urban area with new residential suburbs,
- the dark genre of films noir,
- the presence of organized crime,
- the changing nature of the star system,
- the expansion of celebrity culture and professional gossip journalism.

Perennial interest in the film noir genre provides the most familiar approach to this broad topic. Such work usually bends in the direction of cinema aesthetics and reading a pessimistic cultural mood in film art. But another common approach involves the political and labor situation of the Hollywood blacklist. More recently urban political geography provided a fresh take on surveying the scene, and the emerging new approach of production studies combines an industrial and economic frame with a cultural and artistic approach.

Lewis clearly draws on this base, but makes it his own with a close reading of the public record, especially as represented in the local L.A. press. He describes his project like this:

“a history of Hollywood—the geographic site and the notional construct—built upon stories of the fallen the stricken, the dismissed, discarded, and exiled during Hollywood’s awkward adolescence stretching from the decline of the classical era after World War II to the beginnings of a new Hollywood in the 1960s.”

Los Angeles is and long has been a company town (well, an industry town), with lots of the population working directly in the entertainment complex or dependent on it through secondary or tertiary services. Thus society and entertainment gossip news is actually interwoven with the financial and employment situation. A scandal that torpedoes a prospective film can mean a cascading series of economic effects. So, with this framing, Lewis’s close reading of a long decade of the local press (though apparently not much of *Variety*) gives a close description of many otherwise scattered and minor moments (the slow stages of a crime investigation leading to a trial, or not, etc.). At the same time, he can draw on the many (and often elaborately conflicting) works done by previous investigators of the Black Dahlia murder, the death of Marilyn Monroe, the presence of mobsters such as Bugsy Siegel and Mickey Cohen, and so forth.

Today we’re familiar with some of this terrain by way of interesting neo-noir films that deal with the postwar L.A. scene: *Devil in a Blue Dress* (d. Carl Franklin, 1995), *Mulholland Falls* (d. Lee Tamahori, 1996), *L.A. Confidential* (d. Curtis Hanson, 1997), *This World, Then the Fireworks* (D. Michael Oblowitz, 1997), *The Black Dahlia* (d. Brian De Palma, 2006), *Hollywoodland* (d. Allen Coulter, 2006), *Gangster Squad* (d. Ruben Fleisher, 2013), as well as various outliers such as *Inherent Vice* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 2014) set c. 1970, and some of the more evocative streaming serials such as *Bosch* (2014-) using L.A. Noir style.

Hard-Boiled Hollywood captures the deep contradiction between Los Angeles as a city changed from a desert into a metropolis by optimistic arrivals who aspired to success one the one hand, and on the other the harsh reality that in post-war Los Angeles most do not climb the pyramid. Some rise for a while but also end up falling.

Where Lewis sets a new direction is in trying to understand the particular constellation of factors that led to this phenomenon by considering women at the center. The gradual collapse of the old studio system meant that aspiring female actors trying to break into acting in Hollywood had few opportunities. A key was “being seen” and “making connections” which turned on going out to clubs and bars at night to connect with men with some relation to the industry or who were around. As the press began to notice and publicize a string of murders of young women with corpses dumped often by a roadside, connections were drawn to gangsters, corrupt cops, drifters, wannabees, and prostitution. At the same time, gossip journalism (in Hollywood led by two women: Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper) was powerful and successful at hyping print circulation while shadow boxing with an array of celebrities, studio fixers, agents, publicists and others on the periphery.

Somewhat surprisingly for a film scholar, while mentioning many different films of the era in passing, Lewis discusses only three major films with any depth: *Sunset Boulevard* (d. Billy Wilder, 1950), *In a Lonely Place* (d. Nicholas Ray, 1950), and *The Big Knife* (Robert Aldrich, 1955). And they are given very spare attention. However the Ray film does get an excellent analysis in the volume on it by Dana Polan in the BFI Film Classics series: *In A Lonely Place* (London: British Film Institute, 1994). And the greater context of young women’s situation in the 30s to 60s transition is extensively and originally covered in a series of works by cultural historian Paula Rabinowitz, most notably the outstanding *Black & White & Noir: America’s Pulp Modernism*. (NY: Columbia University Press, 2002).

Film noir, and neo-noir, is a rich topic already enriched by quality academic analysis. But the strength of Lewis’s book, for me, is just how provocatively suggestive it is, so I can’t resist thinking of it in terms of very original (and regrettably, too little known work such as the masterful pastiche of L.A. as seen in the movies, *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (d. Thom Anderson, 2003). Or a one of a kind gritty realist film of Native Americans in Los Angeles’ depths, *The Exiles* (d. Kent Mackenzie, 1961), and the visual essay of a contemporaneous little star, *Debra Paget, For Example* (d. Mark Rappaport, 2015) now streaming on Fandor.

[Full disclosure: Jon Lewis is an old friend; we’ve edited each others work, shared a lot, and discussed a lot of films.]

Random thoughts about L.A. today

I’m always impressed by the many billboard and newspaper ads for discount dental implants and plastic surgery when I’m in L.A. The local evening news always leads with crime and auto accidents and traffic jams (often documented with competing news helicopters) for the first ten minutes before shifting to entertainment business and gossip for the rest of the half hour. The now familiar (and cheap to produce) *Entertainment Tonight* and *Access Hollywood* TV shows began as Los Angeles local news outlet news and features segments. In 1981 *ET* sprung out as its own half hour show.

Currently I enjoy a reality tv version of L.A. Noir. I’ve started watching a streaming series on Netflix, *Shot in the Dark*. It follows several different and competing news stringer cameramen (a novice woman arrives later in the series) who work fires and accidents at night in greater Los Angeles for brief news items that will show in the morning local news shows. They are like paparazzi but for disasters, not celebrities.

Each show pits three different teams racing against each other for winning the nighttime sweepstakes of having your footage accepted, shown, and paid for by the various TV stations (including Hispanic, given the loal demographics). Pulling it all together is a recurrent virtual map of LA that allows the viewer to see an event location (a fire, a major accident, a police manhunt, etc.) and the locations of competing cameramen racing their cars to get to the scene. It’s all presented as if happening the same night, though I suspect hat is artificially packaged—or else they have an incredible number of camera people covering the competing camera men.

This is a perfect guys hardware series. The camera operators drive really nifty new street racer-type vehicles (think Fast and Furious), which are then wildly equipped with communications gear, onboard computers, etc.. Once on the scene they grab their digital camera rigs and rush to as close as they can get (police or fire may have cordoned off the scene) and shoot as first responders do their work. They then return to their vehicle and immediately send off the footage to broadcast news outlets that will hopefully buy it. And off to the next shoot.

Appreciating rebellion

Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, eds. *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 2015)

A model for future studies of film movements and moments, *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema* provides an outstanding resource for understanding African American filmmaking. The end result of a complex and multi-phased effort to look at the most significant black media community in the post WW2 era, the volume builds on earlier work in collecting, archiving, restoring, interviewing, and developing critical research into the life and work of black independent filmmakers in Los Angeles from the late 1960s to the early 1990s.

[Full disclosure: I have an essay in the volume. I’ve known Horak for decades as a writer, editor, and friend, and Stewart was my department colleague at Northwestern University for some years. But my judgment of the volume’s excellence isn’t mine alone: it received the best edited volume award from the Society for Cinema and Media Studies at its 2017 conference.]

The term “L.A. Rebellion” was coined by critic Clyde Taylor as a branding strategy for showcasing the dynamic black films coming out of a community of young African, Caribbean, and African American film students and makers, especially around the University of California in Los Angeles. Operating within the company town context of Hollywood, and following after the Watts Rebellion in the 60s black community, UCLA as a state public institution had some leeway to open its admissions and give minority students an opportunity to learn filmmaking and gain access to equipment. A generation of remarkable filmmakers emerged: Charles Burnett, Haile Gerima, Julie Dash, Jamaa Fanaka, Zeinabu irene Davis, Billy Woodberry, Alile Sharon Larkin, and many more. By and large these artists’ primary goal was to make expressive films about vital concerns of the black community: matters that were seldom represented in mainstream commercial media. In part this reflected a historical omission of genuine black input into the dominant culture, in part it contained a validation of the creativity and imagination of a subordinated community, and in part it embodied a rising generation of ambitious artists’ aspirations.

Following introductory survey essays, the anthology presents a good array of in-depth critical studies, a fascinating collection excerpts from the long-form interviews with the filmmakers (arranged by topics) and concludes with an invaluable comprehensive filmography and bibliography. The critical essays make the previous writings on the L.A. Rebellion (often synthetic overviews highlighting Gerima, Dash, and Burnett) seem well-intentioned but out-of-date. Allyson Nadia Field looks at the early first year student films of the first wave of the Rebellion group which show vibrant political, ethnic, and aesthetic crossings: multicultural and collaborative.

White-controlled Hollywood’s Blaxpoitation genre of the early 70s is often dismissed and contrasted with the “realness” or authenticity of the Rebellion films. But by considering Jamaa Fanaka (*Penitentiary*, etc.), in particular, Chris Horak upends that commonplace. Fanaka was able to make commercially successful features, very popular with black audiences, and also militantly fought for black filmmakers entry into the white guilds and the motion picture Academy itself long before the current wave of activism. David James and Morgan Woolsey each contribute essays on the Rebellion works in relation to their use of music as an expressive part of the works. And Michael Martin reconsiders the connection to the international phenomenon of Third Cinema.

Two critical essays take matters to a higher level. In “Bruising Moments: Affect and the L.A. Rebellion” Samantha Sheppard wants to understand “how characters personalize...the broader trauma, triumphs, tragedies, and anxieties peculiar to African American lived experiences.” Looking closely at Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep*, Woodberry’s *Bless Their Little Hearts*, Bernard Nicolas’ *Daydream Therapy*, and Davis’s *Cycles*, she shows how the films create an “intimate public” creating a spectatorship experience that validates black audiences “sense of themselves, their history, and their experiences.”

Jacqueline Stewart’s “The L.A. Rebellion Plays Itself” discusses how the occasional device of the filmmakers appearing in their own creative work addresses the complexity of the filmmaker’s experience, complicating or extending the “double consciousness” (Dubois) of blacks in contemporary culture with the artist’s creative distance from community and subjects. By its very nature, gaining the skills to make artistic media separates the maker from the community, and this presents issues for the artist, for the “voice” of the media work, for its reception and for its relation to the original community. This richer, deeper, understanding should inform discussion of the L.A. Rebellion from now on. And both Sheppard and Stewart raise important matters for other film movements.

As a whole the anthology provides a masterful survey of a distinct and challenging cultural movement and moment, but it also provides a model for studying and thinking about other collective media events and expressions.

Meet the rebellion

Zeinabu Irene Davis, *Spirits of Rebellion*, DVD, 101 min., Wimmen with a

An introduction to and survey of the Los Angeles Rebellion filmmakers by one of its members, *Spirits of Rebellion* sews a rich quilt from film clips, interviews by participants, while looking at both the past origins and achievements and the present status of the veterans. The video is compelling and varied and especially interesting for finding sharp insights often overlooked by others. For example Larry Clark remarks about the ties he formed with black theatre people in Los Angeles while going to UCLA in film, and Davis herself points to Cauleen Smith, director of *Drysolong* (1998), as carrying on the spirit of the original group even though Smith began her work later than the core group. Similarly, the film reveals the ongoing achievements of figures such as Alile Sharon Larkin, best known for her early short films, who has pioneered working with Afrocentric arts and media in Los Angeles elementary schools, and Bernard Nicholas who reflects on his attempts to distribute work of the LA Rebellion makers. Shirikiana Aina explains how she and Haile Gerima have only been able to make about one feature film every decade or so due to spare resources for these kinds of film, but have sustained Sankofa, a video/book store, cafe, and all-around gathering place for conversation and exchange in Washington DC.

This broader overview helps situate the movement/community as a whole which has often only been referenced by its most celebrated figures such as Haile Gerima, Charles Burnett, and Julie Dash. It also illuminates the close ties to African and third world filmmaking. As one interviewee points out, Ousmane Sembene's first Senegalese films were made just a few years before the UCLA group was forming and screening them and other Third World films. Seeing films made by black people about black people was a wake up and revelation for these aspiring cinema artists. It pushed them to want to make put their own vision and experiences with their communities on record.

Rather than directly feeding into the existing and dominant Hollywood industry, these artists wanted both the expressiveness and control over their work that independence provides. This also involves reorienting one's thinking about what film is and can do. On the one hand, the film argues, the typical critical dismissal of early 70s Blaxploitation films as white appropriation and exploitation of African American culture doesn't address the fact that those films gave jobs to a lot of black actors and were enthusiastically seen, again and again, by black audiences.

As worthy as actions like #OscarsSoWhite are, and as rewarding as it is to see vibrantly imagined work such as *Moonlight* receive an Oscar, the L.A. Rebellion films bent in another direction. Film scholar Jacqueline Stewart observes that early on when showing Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* to a class a student dismissed it as "poor people's home movies." Exactly, the professor explains, the film and others of the movement validate as worthy of attentive regard the lives and environs of ordinary African Americans, something the mainstream film and television marketplace seldom represents, much less represents with understanding, seriousness, and affection. She then explains that ever since, she's always discussed the L.A. films by validating the term "poor people's home movies." (For some years now, Stewart has created and run the Southside Home Movie Project which collects and preserves the rare home mode moving image culture of black Chicago.)

As a whole, *Spirits of Rebellion* captures both the energizing upstart beginning of the Rebellion and the extended and diverse features of its aftermath. It is especially compelling for clips of lesser known work, giving significant consideration to the women involved in the activities, and providing a sense of aesthetic and political diversity in the group. Especially interesting: the vibrant energy formed by a collective imagination and goal of creating a new black cinema. People crewed on each other's projects, learned by doing, started out with self-confident optimism. The spirit of the L.A. Rebellion was radical activism. Taking many different forms besides some notable films, it sustained careers and communities.

[Full disclosure: I have a short interview within the film. Zeinabu Davis is a friend and was my colleague for some years in Northwestern's Radio/TV/Film department, as was Jacqueline Stewart.]

Rebellion and authorship

James Naremore, *Charles Burnett: A Cinema of Symbolic Knowledge* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 2017)

Charles Burnett, *Killer of Sheep* (DVD), Milestone Film and Video.

The first book length study of contemporary writer-director Charles Burnett, James Naremore's extensive study of the African American auteur's career to date gives a measured analysis of an under-recognized filmmaker. [Full disclosure: I've known Naremore since the early 1970s, and I've written on some of Burnett's films. I was asked by UC Press to review the initial proposal for the book at which point I urged both publication and expansion of the plan.]

Best known for his early neorealist style drama, *Killer of Sheep* (1977), a landmark contribution to black cinema in the U.S., Burnett has a long and varied career making films for theatrical and television exhibition. The Library of Congress National Film Registry recognized *Killer of Sheep* early on, helping with preservation and making the film more widely available. Burnett's feature *To Sleep with Anger* (1990), a Hollywood allegorical comedy, failed at the box office (many say it was sabotaged) but remains a highly regarded film by critics. In one reading of the body of his creative work, Burnett has sustained a long career with an interesting variety ranging from low budget indie writer-director films to conventional commercial format projects stretching from documentaries to dramatic fictions. Thus while maintaining an active and creative professional presence, another reading of his corpus follows a long pattern of frustration and compromise in actually producing work, underlining the complicated work of maintaining an independent vision rather than assimilating into the commercial mainstream.

Naremore provides very detailed descriptions of Burnett’s body of films. This is especially welcome because they originated and ended up in such different contexts: television, commercial Hollywood, art house cinema, shorts, festival pieces, etc. It’s difficult to track them all down, and some have had very limited availability. For example, *The Annihilation of Fish* (1999), a filmed stage-piece, never made it past the initial festival circuit despite having two stars: James Earl Jones and Lynn Redgrave. *The Wedding* (1998), a dramatic version of Harlem Renaissance writer Dorothy West’s novel, was produced by Oprah Winfrey as a two-part made-for-television movie starring Hallie Berry. And the actual shoot was produced by Winfrey’s team corralling all creative work within a budget-driven TV style that left little room for Burnett’s talents. In his excellent book, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (expanded edition, 2008) Naremore validated Burnett’s *The Glass Shield* (1994) another project that was limited by studio decisions. Despite these frustrations, Burnett has continued to be active by consistently pursuing projects that take a serious and respectful stance to African Americans and their experiences. In person Burnett has a soft-spoken and firm presence which is reflected in his work as an artist. He has accomplished much in 40+ years of filmmaking, this book is a welcome recognition of his achievements. And, (ta-dah!) Burnett was just given a Governor’s Award (which includes an Oscar statue) from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. DVD

Charles Burnett, *Killer of Sheep* (DVD), Milestone Film and Video.

The 2 disc DVD package includes *Killer of Sheep* (1977), an unforgettable classic, two different edits of Burnett’s second feature, *My Brother’s Wedding*, (the original 1983 version and a 2007 director’s cut), and four short films from different moments in his career: *Several Friends* (1969), *The Horse* (1973), *When It Rains* (1995), and *Quiet as Kept* (2007). An outstanding restoration.



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